TF SHORTIES- FACE THE MUSIC
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Self Imposed Challenge- Do not exceed 5k with the wordcount. At least 1k post-transformation.

Maximus Noire was a foolish, selfish man. He lived in the wealthiest part of town, coming from a family with a lot of money and the fifth generation of men running the Noire Company. Whenever he ran low on cash, he stole more money from his company's funds to support his opulent lifestyle.

He was currently attending his own funeral.

It wasn't in the form of the plump, balding man often dressed in sumptuous garb, with narrow black eyes and a small goatee. That form was no longer on this earth. The Maximus attending his own funeral was a boy of fifteen, not a fifty-year-old man. His sad blue eyes scanned the funeral goers from the shadows. His head felt funny as the buzzing sound coming from the headphones he wore began to rise and fall.

But let's rewind a bit, back to when he was still Maximus Noire and not on the fast track to becoming someone else entirely.

A few days prior to the funeral, Maximus was hosting a party, which he was throwing with the company's money. He though no-one else knew that little factoid. He kept his paper trail quite clean, and it was easy to erase things and alter data in the

computer age. The party, of course, was for the rich and powerful. No peons from the company were invited.

So it was a bit of a surprise when Angelina strode in. Angelina was Maximus's secretary. The blonde was overworked, underpaid and most certainly not invited. But- with her fancy dress, pretty face and beautiful jewelry, she was able to remain undetected for quite some time. Her red purse, however, seemed a bit too big for such a formal event. It bulged slightly, like it hid a large object.

Maximus only discovered Angelina's presence through word-of-mouth. People were whispering to each other about the beautiful stranger and her mysterious bag, like children playing telephone. It eventually reached the attention of Maximus himself, which he found odd. He didn't invite anyone with the description he heard. As he waddled across the large, extravagant venue where the party was hosted, he found her turning down a drink from a guest. In her lap- like a small dog- was the red bag.

"Angelina?" Maximus roared. "What are you doing here? I didn't invite you!"

Angelina laughed a soft laugh. "I just had something I wanted to show my favorite boss," she said.

"Could it not wait until morning?" Maximus demanded, his face red as a beet.

"Oh no," Angelina said. "I wanted all your friends to see it. It's a very rare item I was able to obtain from a friend of mine."

Here, Angelina revealed the contents of her bag. Maximus was slightly excited at the prospect of a gift, but the excitement bled back to anger when he saw the gift was just a simple pair of bulky purple headphones.

"Where did you get those? Wal-Mart?" Maximus asked, causing his friends to erupt in laughter.

Angelina showed no sign of being upset. She simply waited for the laughter to die down before saying, "I told you, Mr. Noire. It was a gift from a friend. See, they don't look like much, but I hear wearing them increases one's luck and wealth."

Maximus didn't look it, but he was highly superstitious and believed in all sorts of lucky charms. He held his hand out to accept the gift. "How much does it increase my luck and wealth?" he asked, his anger melting like snow in the springtime. "And how long must I wear them? They look terribly ugly."

"I think a few minutes should do it," Angelina said, placing the headphones in Maximus's eager, meaty hand. He put them on without hesitation.

It was Angelina's turn to start laughing. "What? Why are you laughing? Is it because I look ridiculous with these on?"

"No," she said. "It's because you're a total moron. You fell for that easier than I thought you would. See, I found out about what you've been doing with the company's money- spending it on parties like this one instead of paying me and my fellow employees.

"So when your son Bartholomew met this woman who claimed to be a witch, we hatched a plan. We persuaded Bartholomew to have a talk with her, and she created those headphones to transform you into someone else entirely. You'll be officially dead. Then your son takes over the company and there will be no more sneaking around. We'll finally get paid our proper dues."

Upon hearing about the Noire Company's secret, the rich patrons began to back away nervously. They didn't believe the part about witches, but Maximus could see they

somewhat believed the claims abut his money. “Bartholomew would never work with a woman who would do this!” Maximus roared.

“He would, and he did,” Angelina said with an eye roll. “If you stuck your head out of your ass for fifteen seconds, you’d know he’s had his eye on the CEO’s chair for years. He’s promised us a better payroll in exchange for our help. Oh, look. It seems the transformation is beginning.”

“What do you mean-” Maximus began, but he felt something tickle the back of his neck. It was something he hadn’t felt in years- hair. Unlike his original black hair, this hair was bright orange. It spiked up in every direction, especially in the back.

The appearance of this hair made the party guests begin to panic. They all flooded towards the door, as if they’d be transformed if they stuck around. No-one stayed behind except for Angelina and Maximus, the latter of whom was blubbering and trying to shout something at his secretary.

A strange noise filled the room- some odd cross between bubbling and the hiss of a boiling tea kettle. Maximus’s fat began to melt away. He tried to take the headphones off, but was having trouble thanks to his arms losing their pudge, creating new arms that didn’t seem to obey his brain quite as well as the old ones.

“Don’t even try,” Angelina said with a laugh. “The headphones are stuck until the transformation is complete.”

Maximus’s body kept boiling and bubbling until all the fat was gone. He was now almost too skinny, especially around the arms and waist. Slight curves made him appear almost feminine. He also lost about a foot in height. His body was unreal-looking and cartoonish. A faint outline began to appear around his body and clothing, making them literally appear like a cartoon that fell into the real world.

Speaking of Maximus’s clothing, it pulled in on itself, for it was now far too big for him. As it crumpled like tissue paper, it became a baggy purple shirt with a floppy collar and white shorts that only seemed to show how thin his legs were. Even though his clothes were shrinking to fit better his new frame, they still seemed too big.

A yellow armband and a white device on a cord appeared around his left arm and neck respectively. His face underwent another series of dramatic changes. Black eyes turned blue and became slightly bigger and more expressive. His fat lips shrunk out of view and his nose turned slimmer. His goatee fell out, leaving him clean-shaven. These changes made him wince uncomfortably. He groaned in pain, but a new, more youthful voice came out instead of the deep, authoritative booming one he was used to.

The shoes he was wearing were last to go. As he gained a loose black belt, his polished black shoes shuddered, as if they had a will of their own and were resisting the transformation. But the illusion was not to last. Large purple sneakers took their place as Maximus shuddered once more and fell to the ground, panting in agony.

Angelina watched the whole thing in silence, fascinated by the changes. Once it was finally done, she said, “Well, I must be going. Oh, keep in mind that the headphones are supposed to erase your memories and personality over a span of three days. I don’t know how, and I don’t really care. The deed’s been done. Hopefully, this is the last time I see you.”

Angelina walked out as Maximus groaned weakly. He was now alone in the venue. Crawling to a wall nearby- which doubled as a large, fancy mirror- he looked at

his new body for the first time. At first, he could not believe what he was seeing. Then he touched his head with a shaking hand, the reflection copying his actions.

The abandoned venue was filled with the sounds of his screams for several minutes before- at last- he collapsed in exhaustion.

The first day began in the empty venue. Maximus rose to his feet, unsteady. His first view was in the mirror, which proved that last night wasn't a fever dream. He slumped against the wall for a few minutes, staring numbly at his reflection and trying to process what happened the night before. "I have to get help," he said. "Surely someone will believe me!"

Maximus raced out the door, only to find it was more difficult to get people to believe him than he originally thought. Most people ran in fear or confusion or muttered something about Roger Rabbit. The few who remained seemed either unable or unwilling to believe his story. For two hours, he walked up and down the ritzy streets he once practically owned in search of help.

The people on the street weren't the only ones working against him. The headphones were buzzing, muttering indecipherable sweet nothings into his ear. It was likely some kind of subliminal message. Occasionally, Maximus would see brief visions of flashbacks to things that never occurred, in a world that didn't exist. When this happened, he momentarily forgot what he was doing, but he was quick to jump back into action.

Finally, Maximus collided with a chubby man in a tan suit. "Parsons?" he asked. Hope filled his heart. Parsons was there the night he changed. Surely he would assist him.

Parsons looked around for a few minutes, unaware who he collided with. With a growl, Maximus shouted, "Down here! It's Maximus, you idiot!"

Parsons finally made eye contact with Maximus, only to scream like a little girl and retreat like an elephant scared of a mouse. "Please don't change me too!" he cried. "I don't want anything you've got!"

"I'm not contagious!" Maximus roared. "I simply need your help! I need to get the company back. *We* need to get the company back! I can't let my idiot son have it! I'm not dead anymore!"

Parsons raised an eyebrow. "Anymore?" he asked.

Maximus gulped. He now had this new and very vivid memory of being dead for several weeks. His ghost- what did his ghost do? Was it even here in reality? It was and it wasn't at the same time. Returning to the matter at hand, Maximus asked, "Does anyone else know about this sabotage?"

"Oh," Parsons said. He was a simple man, the kind to easily forget. "Well, there are people arranging for your funeral right now. Angelina said you were visiting your summer home, but it burned down while you were there."

“You mean she burned it down,” Maximus said darkly.

“Perhaps she did, perhaps it was an associate,” Parsons said. “But that’s all I know. The general public doesn’t know you’re still alive.”

“When is this funeral?” Maximus demanded.

“Two days from now,” Parsons replied.

“Two days! Adding today, that’ll be three! These blasted headphones would’ve gotten me by then!” Maximus roared. He reached up and grabbed the taller man by the collar. “We have until then to bring these fools to justice. Understood?”

Parsons nodded weakly as he followed Maximus into the crowd.

The rest of the day consisted of plotting in Parson’s lavish mansion on the other side of the upper class zone. They were in an office littered with papers, for Parsons was never a very neat man. Still, even this rat-hole reflected wealth. Only the best desk, cabinets and even chairs could be found here. The chairs were made of black leather. They sat upon these as they planned.

Maximus’s ideas all looped back to one thing- lawsuits. If he ever had a problem with anyone, he’d sue them for all they were worth. Fortunately, he rarely had problems until today. Whenever he went this route, however, Parsons would remind him he couldn’t.

“You can’t go in court looking like that,” he said, scrolling through a small but powerful laptop he kept on his desk amid scattered papers. “There’s already news stories about you. Well, they don’t mention your name, but there have been sightings of a cartoon person wandering around.”

“Shit,” Maximus groaned. “I mean, that isn’t good for us! Odd. Where did that slur come from?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, a horrifying vision gripped him. It was longer and more “real” than the other ones he’d experienced throughout the day. There was a man and a boy. They had guns. The man ran off, but the boy- the other boy- turned his gun on Maximus. He couldn’t move. His breath caught in his chest.

The boy pulled the trigger.

Screaming, Maximus was pulled back into the real world by Parsons, who shook him violently. “Maximus? Are you alright Maximus?” he asked in a panicked voice. “You were zoning out and then you started screaming?”

“I’m fine,” Maximus said darkly. “Just leave me alone.”

“Are you sure?” Parsons said. “We still need to plan on how to stop-”

“I said leave me alone!” Maximus roared.

There was a long, awkward silence, filled only by the buzz of the headphones. Finally, Parsons broke the silence. “Well, you can stay here until we get this all sorted out, Maximus,” he said. “The guest bedroom is upstairs, second door to the left.”

Immediately, Maximus huffed and stormed up the stairs, leaving a very confused Parsons standing in the office. Halfway up the stairs, Maximus became confused as

well. Why was he acting like a moody, bratty teenager? There was work to be done! Still, he wanted to get away from Parsons. He wanted to get away from everyone. He didn't need anyone- least of all that traitorous woman.

Or that traitorous boy who killed him.

The second day, Maximus woke up feeling like someone important was missing.

It was a girl. Her name was Shiki. Without her, he would never have survived the Reaper's Game. The Reaper's Game was alien to him until that morning, when the headphones seemed to supply all he needed to know. Now, there was a second Reaper's Game, with Shiki as the prize.

Maximus shook his head. This was, of course, all a fallacy made by the headphones. He had to get his real partner- Parsons- to help him escape this dreadful curse.

Maximus felt weak and tired going down the stairs. He was grasping the rail with a shaking hand. He followed his failing memories, then his nose to the dining room, where he found Parsons already eating every and any breakfast food imaginable. Bacon, eggs, pancakes- all were present and accounted for at the long table. But Maximus wasn't hungry. Instead, he sat at the far end of the table. He wanted to get away from Parsons. He wanted to get away from everyone.

Parsons noticed Maximus's choice of seating immediately. "You look glum," he said between bites. There was no reply for several seconds, so Parsons continued the conversation himself. "We still need a plot to stop your son from taking over the company, remember? It's all in the news today that he'll be moving in."

"Shiki," Maximus muttered to himself. "No. Wait. You're right. I can't be moping around like this. There's too much to do. You're saying he's already moving in?"

Parsons nodded. "There was a big news announcement about it, as I previously said," he stated gravely. "The newscasters are also still talking about your death. The funeral-"

A light bulb suddenly switched in Maximus's head. "The funeral! That's it!" he cried. "I'll storm my own funeral! Then they'll know I'm still alive!"

"Two problems with that, Maximus," Parsons said. "One problem is your appearance. The second is that you will forget who you are the day of the funeral."

"Not if I have a reminder," Maximus said, looking up at his now-taller friend. "I want a letter written. Immediately."

By the end of the second day, Maximus felt some strange sense that Parsons was betraying him.

The feeling started out low, then it started to grow. It was as if Parsons was other people who hurt him- a boy named Beat and the boy who shot him. They were all combining into one being, and that being was Parsons.

Parsons didn't seem to know or mind, and remained friendly towards him. He even invited Maximus to remain in his home. "It'll be safer here than out there," he explained. "You'll be well-fed here, at least. Heaven knows you need it."

"Na," Maximus muttered. "I just need that damn letter- I mean, the letter- written and then I'm out of here."

There was a pause before Parsons asked, "But where would you go?"

"I'll go right outside the funeral home," Maximus replied, his whole body shaking.

"So you'd go without the comfort of a bed?" Parsons questioned.

There was a long silence. Maximus hadn't thought of that. He couldn't check into a hotel in his current form. Hell, he couldn't do much of anything. But the feelings of imminent betrayal were growing in him. "As soon as I get the letter, I'm going," he said seriously.

"I doubt that," Parsons said. "You've been displaying a lot of batty behavior since you changed, but it's always passed. You'll change your mind in a few minutes."

Parsons left Maximus alone, but he wasn't going to "change his mind in a few minutes". Once he had what he wanted, he'd leave. He knew it was smarter to stay with a partner, but that was the Reaper's Game. This was reality.

He had no choice but to fend for himself.

The letter was produced, edited and printed within several hours, to make sure its text was just right.

To whoever is reading this,

By the time you read this, you will be standing in the place of Maximus Noire. I don't know your name, and I don't give a shit what it is. You have a job to do, and that job is to take my company back from my son Bartholomew Noire. This man- along with my secretary Angelina- conspired to kill me by turning me into, well, you. You are to expose them, fire the secretary, sue them both for all they're worth and reclaim my rightful place as one of the biggest CEOs in America.

Enclosed in this letter are several diagrams and instructions detailing how to actually run a company, since you most likely forgot how to do so due to those headphones you're wearing. Throw the damn things away immediately. Like, as soon as you read this sentence.

Good luck,
Maximus

The paper did not have time to cool once printed. Maximus stapled it to the diagrams, found his unchanged credit card for the company still in his wallet, attached it with a paper clip and ran out into the night. He escaped entirely undetected, driven by emotions that may or may not have been his own.

It took a few hours, but Parsons realized Maximus was gone when he didn't come to dinner. "Maximus?" he asked, looking around his home wth the aid of his servants for several hours. "Where have you gone? You really left? Maximus!"

There was no answer, for- as this search was being conducted- Maximus already looked up where his funeral would be held on a computer in the public library, went directly there, then took over a bench right outside and fell into another troubled sleep.

When Maximus woke up, he felt guilty. He felt horrible for mistrusting Beat- or Parsons- or whoever the hell invited him to stay in his house. The results of his escape were painful. His limbs and back ached, and it took several minutes of stretching to get the agonizing feeling out of them. After checking to see if he had his letter- which he held for a purpose unknown to him, but it seemed important- Maximus entered the funeral home.

Meanwhile, Parsons was speeding to the funeral home. He had trouble falling asleep last night, wondering why Maximus left. He was never the brightest man, so it never occurred to him until the next morning that the headphones were more severely altering his friend's behavior slowly over time. So Parsons- after eating heartily- got into his vehicle and had his chauffeur race at top speed to the funeral home, unaware that Maximus was already in the door, hiding in the shadows and watching.

The first thing Maximus noticed was that no-one from the party was present. Instead, there were only stuffy old family members he never contacted, a few friends who hadn't attended the party and his son. The traitorous snake! He looked like a handsome young man in his thirties, but Maximus knew the truth and that was-

What was it?

Maximus crumpled the letter in his hand, the sound of crisp paper alerting him to its presence. He unfolded the letter to find a stapled packet, ten pages thick. He vaguely remembered making this. It would either help him stop Bartholomew or some entity whose name escaped him. He read the very first page over and over, the words becoming less and less real until someone approached him.

"Maximus!" Parsons cried as he barged in the door.

Parsons's funeral-crashing was far more noticeable than Maximus's, since the latter slipped in quietly. Everyone turned to face Parsons, who they thought at first was a distraught funeral-goer. When the man waddled back and forth a few times and eventually located Maximus hiding behind a wall, he blindly pulled him into the open. "Maximus!" he repeated.

The boy who was once Maximus looked down at the papers in his hand. They did say something about that being his name, but the headphones- which he'd been told

to discard- said his name was something else. Trying to remove the headphones, he found them still stuck. Meanwhile, Bartholomew smirked as he approached the two of them.

"That's not my father," he said. "That looks nothing like my father."

"Stop denying it!" Parsons roared. "You ordered this to be done to him! See this letter?" Here, he snatched the paper from Maximus's hand. "Read it! All of you! This is Maximus, and he's alive, but not for much longer. At a party several nights ago, his secretary smuggled in these headphones and changed him! Should we do nothing soon, he'll disappear for go-"

Parsons was interrupted by wild laughter. Bartholomew started it, then it spread- like an infection- to every other person in the room sans Parsons and Maximus himself. The boy cried, "Give me back my letter!" as it still felt important to him, reaching up and grabbing for it.

"Even if that was my father," Bartholomew said between chuckles, "Why would I want him back? The old man stole from the company all the time! He was a dishonest man, a cruel man. Let him disappear for good, I say!"

With his secret out, the laughter died down, replaced by murmurs. Even the closest of his friends were unaware that he stole money to fund parties and other parts of his opulent lifestyle.

Oddly enough, the person who knew least about this was Maximus himself. The letter never mentioned that. Maximus seized the paper from Parsons and flipped through the other papers, finding charts and information he did not understand. He expected this, since the letter did warn him he'd forget everything.

The very last page horrified him. It contained several bank account and PIN numbers for the company. One was circled in red ink and read, "The richest of the company's bank accounts. If you ever need money, you can borrow from this one." Behind it was a credit card, presumably for that account.

"Oh my God," the boy muttered. "He wanted me to do it again."

The boy roared and fell to his knees, dropping the paper on the ground. Bartholomew picked it up and read the letter on the first pages, then said, "Well, Parsons? This is quite the elaborate hoax. I don't even know how you managed to create this living cartoon and then had the gall to pass it off as my dead father. It looks like it fell out of one of those Japanese anime things."

"You're lying," the boy growled. "You- you- um. I don't remember."

Bartholomew snapped his fingers. "Ah, yes!" he said. "Now I recognize this character! My daughter played a game with a character named 'Neku'. He was a skinny little fellow, just like you."

Upon hearing the name "Neku", like it was some password that unlocked something deep in his mind, the boy's expression went blank. "That's my name?" he asked, his tone distant.

"I believe it was," Bartholomew replied. He held out his hand. "Come now, Neku. We can't leave you out here, or else other people might catch you- people who are interested in how you look and want to find out why you look that way."

"What's wrong with me?" the boy asked, tilting his head.

"You are a living cartoon- the first of your kind," Bartholomew explained. "People might want to experiment on you."

“He’s the reason you were changed!” Parsons roared.

“I changed?” the boy asked, his head feeling fuzzier and fuzzier as the static in the headphones grew louder and louder.

“Now now,” Bartholomew said. “Let’s not get carried away. You have two choices, Neku. I can hide you, or you can take your chances out there until someone gets you.”

There was a very long pause. “I don’t trust you,” the boy finally said. “But I have no choice. Do I? I don’t know anything about this ‘Maximus’ person except what was in the packet.”

“Forget the packet,” Bartholomew said sternly.

“Maximus! He’s trying to trick you!” Parsons insisted.

Several things then occurred to the boy. He had no reason to be in this funeral home, where he knew no-one, and he was awfully far from Shibuya. “I need to go home,” he said.

“I can take you home, you kno-” Bartholomew began, but the boy- no, Neku- waved his hand.

“This is not my home,” he said.

Neku grabbed the credit card and ran out the door before anyone could stop him. He didn’t know if he was Maximus and didn’t care. If he was, then he was going to steal from the company one final time.

From under his hoodie, Neku could see his home.

Neku extracted several hundred thousand dollars from an ATM, then set to work. He dug a hoodie out of the garbage to hide his face, then used some of the money to buy a better hoodie, baggy pants and boots that hid his true appearance. He then used the computer in the public library- which took a while to find- to order one-way plane tickets to Japan.

The nearest airport required an Uber car to get to, but Neku was able to make that purchase easily and still have tons of money left over. Once at the airport- carrying only one bag with a few belongings he bought the day before- he converted the rest of his ill-gotten gains into yen. It would help him survive for a while.

Now, all his hard work was paying off. Neku could finally see the island of his birth from the plane. He wasn’t sure if he was really born there, but his heart felt like it was. His excitement over-rode his stiff limbs and his irritation at the baby crying two seats behind him the entire flight.

Suddenly- for the first time- he began to worry. Were all the people here like him, or just a few? It didn’t matter if they were or they weren’t. He was away from those people trying to hunt him down and finally returning to the streets of Shibuya. He belonged there- cartoon or not.

After all, the headphones told him, his friends were waiting.